

Child Advocate Kevin Ryan's  
Commencement Address to the 2005 graduating class of Collier High School,  
Wickatunk, NJ  
June 10, 2005

To be successful, to be happy, to be loving, to be good, you must believe in yourselves. You must. You must. Just think of all that you have overcome, the odds you have defied, the hurdles you have crossed. Experience this graduation night as the wind at your back, as proof of your ability to persevere.

Surely, this courageous Collier class of 2005 must know by now that failure is an event, not a person. Think to the voices from the road behind you who lobbed that word - failure - at you as an epithet, as an indictment. And see where you sit today, in this garden of Collier, this sacred place where coaches and counselors, teachers and team mates, your families and these Sisters of the Good Shepherd, have rooted for you, cheered you and directed you. See yourselves today as a success, and believe it. Truly. I say this not to congratulate you, but to challenge you, because God has much yet in store for each of you, and you must have faith in yourselves to embrace the road ahead.

I worked with homeless teenagers for almost ten years in the South Bronx, Times Square, Newark and Atlantic City, and I met kids during those years who had lived their entire lives never hearing the words, "you're beautiful," "you're special," "good job," or "I love you." Their heads buzzed with the voices of adults saying, "you're a failure," "you're stupid," "you're disabled," "you're doomed."

And over the years, for too many of these kids, the pitch and the timbre of those dissonant, scornful voices melded into a single voice...their own. They could not see themselves as anything but defective, because no one else had. And the voice in their heads - their own voices - warned them not to dream, not to aspire, not to work hard. They allowed themselves to succumb to the plagues of drugs, and prostitution, and violence, because they believed themselves failures and misfits. Be not those kids! Banish those doubts from your minds, for tonight you graduate from Collier High School by the sheer force of your will and commitment.

There is an old Irish prayer that begins with the words, "May the road rise up before you." But I will not pray this prayer for you, because you have already risen up to meet the road.

So rise up. I want the graduates to stand now, because I am nearly finished here, and some applause is going to break out, and I want it to be for you, not me. This is your night. Listen to me: we measure the height of a person in this society by the largeness of one's heart, by the power of one's will, and by the dignity of one's spirit. Gathered around you today are your families and friends, your teachers and counselors, and these Sisters who have prayed for you and loved you. And as all of us gathered here tonight look up

to you now, and think about what you have overcome to be here tonight, the odds you have defied, the hurdles you have crossed, we think that you are the tallest men and women we have ever met. God bless you Collier graduates!